Recognition of Experiential & Accredited Learning (REAL) Project 527723-LLP-1-2012-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-GMP

The Real Project

Interim Quality Report

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Introduction

This Interim Evaluation Report is based on the activities that were laid out in the Quality Plan designed at the outset of the project by the External Evaluator. As indicated in that plan the role of the external evaluator is to ensure technical process evaluation of the project by monitoring the project's progress and to ensure an impartial view on the project.

In order to be able to assess the project's progress adequately, this plan indicated that the external evaluator would participate in at least two partner meetings throughout the life of the project and as determined in consultation with the Project Coordinator. It was also agreed that he would liaise with the Project Coordinator to ensure that there is synergy between evaluation activities and those of quality assurance as laid out in the *Quality Plan* as detailed in WP7. This would involve an overall comparative overview of the work of partners against a range of criteria as described below.

He would conduct formative evaluation of the project through the monitoring of deliverables and results according to the work packages and including partners' perceptions of the project's progress.

At this stage an interim report would be produced evaluating the outcomes of the project in terms of meeting the original aims of the project.

This report therefore is based on attendance at one partner meeting (Stirling – 7th February 2013), regular bi-monthly meetings with the Project Co-ordinator on the 26th April, 10th June, 6th August and the 8th November; reports from other partner meetings in Tallinn in April/May 2013 and in Timisoara in October 2013 and analysis of materials produced by the project, most particularly those published on the website

At this point within the project in advance of the interim project report, the evaluation is an overall analysis of the *internal processes* and the *overall management processes* of the project based on its objectives and a range of other indicators as specified in the Quality Plan. The indicators overall used for *the internal processes and management processes* are:-

- Project deliverables are delivered on time

- Monitoring of risks and analysis of project milestones
- The day to day running of the consortium
- The management of communication within the consortium
- The management of communication between the consortium and the Commission

For each of these indicators a four-point scale is used to assess the progress of the work plans and achievement to date. This four point scale is:-

i/all goals achieved, ii/most goals achieved iii/considerable numbers of goals still to be achieved iv/unsatisfactory

The analysis in this report also covers the following indicators

- *A comparative analysis of the quality of the deliverables (based on the status reports of WP2 and WP3) & a commentary*

- *A comparative analysis of the external impact of the project (based on the dissemination reporting and partners' national stakeholder fora)*

- *The effectiveness of the quality cycle*

- *Actions of WP leaders and partners as a result of feedback*

These areas of evaluation are dealt with below.

The project manager was asked to report against these indicators and subsequently the partners have been asked to comment on their perceptions of effectiveness of these aspects of the project. The perceptions of partners will have been gathered subsequent to the writing of this report and will be reported upon in a final evaluation report.

Progress against Indicators

A/ An analysis of the internal processes and management processes

Project deliverables are delivered on time

The Scoping Exercise (WP2 product) has been delivered according to schedule and has been published on the website (www.realrpl.eu)

The testing of the Toolkit (WP3 product) was delayed by one month due to the loss of two key staff members from the partner, Learning Link Scotland, responsible for this area of work. These were the Principal Researcher and Manager from Learning Link Scotland (LLS) who have not, at this time of writing been replaced. However the Toolbox was produced and is also accessible through the project website.

The only deviation of any significance from the original plan relates to the development of the project website. It was originally planned that the website would be developed by staff within the School of Education at the University of Stirling. However, a change of staff at the university made this no longer possible. The website was then created by the university's Web Development Team, based within one of its service departments. This however required a change in policy in terms of the university's regulations in relation to websites and the creation of a new template for this type of website. Together these two factors lengthened the process of development and implementation. These changes to both staffing and policy at the University of Stirling meant that the website did not

go live until August 2013 and this meant that promotion of the project did not start fully until September 2013.

However since website went live in August it has been maintained by staff in the School of Education and will continue to do so for the duration outlined in the original application.

Monitoring of risks and analysis of project milestones

There are always risks in projects, notably those associated with the availability of staff and resources in ways that were not originally envisaged. The Project Co-ordinator has been exemplary in monitoring risks and ensuring that any setbacks have been remediated, and indeed build upon to advantage.

The example of the toolbox has reported above is one of these, and the Project Co-ordinator has taken vital and important remedial actions. Learning Link Scotland because of staff changes were not able to fulfil all aspects of its anticipated activities under WP3. Further, because of other staffing changes the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has also not completed all the activity as detailed in WP3 and therefore the requisite number of working days allocated in the project description for WP3 will not be drawn down by the SCQF or by Learning Link Scotland.

This work instead has been undertaken by project's principal researcher from the University of Stirling who has undertaken these outstanding tasks in WP3 and the University of Stirling has increased the number of days claimed for its Project researcher to cover this additional activity. Furthermore the project has taken advantage of online processes that were available in an institution geographical close to the co-ordinating institution.

The delays the development and implementation of the website are a second example of risks that have been managed. They point to some of the difficulties that projects can face when they try to utilise internal means to deliver aspects of their work. In this case delay was caused not only by a lack of appropriate internal human resource but also by unexpected internal policies in corporate communications.

Whilst it is unfortunate that these deviations from the original intentions have occurred it is to the credit of the Project Co-ordinator that these actions were taken in a timely way to ensure that activities were undertaken and no damage has ensued.

The day to day running of the consortium

My observations have been that the consortium has been managed well. I have been copied into many email chains initiated by the Project Co-ordinator, and the responses of the partners. There has been extensively dialogue and very good advice provided to partners on a very frequent basis.

The management of communication within the consortium

As indicated above there are good processes in place for electronic communications with partners; substantial efforts in particular have been made to communicate the difficulties at Learning Link Scotland. In addition there have been the anticipated face-to-face meetings of partners, each of which have been minuted well with clear Action Points and time lines specified for tasks against partners in Meeting 1.

The management of communication between the consortium and the Commission

I have been informed of any communications with the EC, and have been informed of responses as

appropriate. My analysis is that these communications have always been conducted in a timely and appropriate fashion.

Recommendations

1. **Whilst necessary action points have been noted in Meeting 1, 2 and 3 those specified in Meeting 2 (Tallinn) were not accompanied by timelines as was the case for Meeting 1 (Stirling). At Meeting 3 (Timisoara) actions were more closely time-bound and it is recommended that this continues.**
2. **Attempts should be made to bring Learning Link Scotland actively back into the partnership. Clearly staffing changes and different priorities of organisations are not within the control of the co-ordinator, it would be to the advantage of the project if they were involved given that they are an agency with good links to potential beneficiaries. That being said there are been no discernable loss in terms of outcomes up to this point.**
3. **SCQF are a small agency with limited staffing. Due to the re-allocation of job roles SCQF were unable to claim all their allocated days for some parts of the first year of the project. However, the number of days unclaimed is small and the re-allocation of job roles is now complete. It is important for SCQF to be engaged in year 2, but because of their important national role. It is important that the organization be supported by the Project Co-ordinator in order that they play their anticipated role in the project during its second year.**

Overall Analysis

ALL GOALS ACHEIVED

B/ A comparative analysis of the quality of the deliverables (based on the status reports of WP2 and WP3) & a commentary

The report of the Scoping Exercise (WP2) is found at http://www.realrpl.eu/media/real-rpl/documents/Scoping%20exercise_REAL.pdf. It considers three issues related to the recognition of experiential and accredited learning as follows:

Best Practice in Learner Centredness
Best Practice in Evidencing and Recording Previous Learning
Best Practice in Quality Assurance

In doing this it cites examples of practice in the countries who are partners (Estonia, Romania, UK (Scotland) and Ireland), contextualizing them with national policy and regulatory systems as well as wider European imperatives and the work of agencies such as CEDEFOP. It is a useful starting point, though I would suggest that it should be seen as a document that is developed further in tandem with the website. For example, many national and EU level documents are mentioned in the report and these could be hotlinked either to their original source or to documents available in other parts of the site. Currently there a number of useful hotlinks within the site, but these might be developed with a commentary and actual reports.

The Toolkit (WP3) has been developed and is available by password access on the website. A very positive gain from the handover of the process of design of the toolkit to other staff members has meant that it has been developed as an online product, which was not originally envisaged. The Toolkit appears potentially to be a very systematic way for learners to map their experiential and accredited learning against NQFs. As envisaged it the report for Project Meeting 3 in Romania, obtaining feedback from learners using the Toolkit is very important.

Recommendations

1. **The Scoping Report be enhanced with hotlinks to materials**
2. **Related developments be made within the website – this would involve commentaries related to links and key EC, national and project reports being made available where possible for the convenience of those using the site.**
3. **The feedback from learners using the Toolkit should be systematically analysed and adjustments made where necessary**
4. **The online tool may if demonstrably workable become very useful across Europe to obviate the time and labour currently used in validation processes, which often make these infeasible. It is suggested that in each country the Toolbox is utilised not only as an instrument for mapping against the EQF, but only where available NQFs.**

Overall Analysis

MOST GOALS ACHEIVED

C/ A comparative analysis of the external impact of the project (based on the dissemination reporting and partners' national stakeholder fora)

At this point is too early to comment on this aspect of the project. However there is a good deal of activity in terms of dissemination. Prior to the website being available, a presentation of the project took place at the Education Centres Association conference in Leicester, England (November 2012); the project was also presented at the Scottish RPL Network meeting in March 2013. Since the website has gone live (which creates great advantage in supporting presentations at events) the project has further been promoted at:-

A meeting with the Director of Lifelong Learning at Education Scotland (a Scottish Government Agency) (Sept 2013)
The Power of Adult Learning Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland (October 2013)
The European RPL Network conference in Krakow, Poland (October 2013)
The IDEAL Project conference in Vilnius, Lithuania (October 2013)
The ESREA/ReNADeT conference on Bonn, Germany (paper delivered) (November 2013)
Scottish Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (SUALL) November 2013

In addition, one of the project Partners, Marin Gross of Tallinn University, has taken over as the Chair of the European RPL Network. It is anticipated that this will have a positive impact on the exploitation of the project.

Recommendations

1. **Dissemination events should also be organised as soon as is feasible at national level in both Ireland and Romania.**
2. **The position of Dr Gross is an important one and advantage should be taken of this in the second phase of the project to ensure maximum impact.**
3. **The use of an online tool, not anticipated at the outset of the project is a real bonus to the possibility of impact by allowing a much greater number of beneficiaries to take advantage of the work. Means perhaps could be established to achieve that.**
4. **The website can be enhanced as in the previous section to facilitate greater communication of the project's work and *de facto* more impact.**

Overall Analysis

MOST GOALS ACHIEVED

D/ The effectiveness of the quality cycle

The quality cycle involves a clear specification of processes and actions. It has within delineated responsibilities, the lynchpin of which are the relationships and communications a/ between the Project Co-ordinator and the Evaluator and b/ the Project Co-ordinator and the Evaluator and c/ the Evaluator and other partners. These links appear to have worked well.

At this point in the project the main next step is for the Evaluator to liaise with partners, to gain detailed information about their perspectives.

Recommendations

1. **The anticipated plans for quality and evaluation be continued**
2. **As anticipated detailed feedback be gathered by the Evaluator from partners**

Overall Analysis

ALL GOALS ACHEIVED

E/ Actions of WP leaders and partners as a result of feedback

At this point it is not possible to report on this formal feedback and recommendations therein for partners and WP leaders. However, I am entirely satisfied that feedback made verbally at Project Meeting 1 and in meetings with the Project Co-ordinator, and in emails, have led to appropriate responses.

Recommendation

1. **Current arrangements for feedback to WP leaders and partners included via the Project Co-ordinator are continued.**

Overall Analysis

ALL GOALS ACHEIVED

Future Actions

It has been anticipated that during the rest of the project that the Evaluator will:

1. Undertake a comparative analysis of the external impact of the project.

   Evidence of impact goes well beyond simply dissemination events having been organised and materials having been produced, but of evidence gathered from beneficiaries of the work of the project. Possible indicators that might be used might be:

   - statements from beneficiaries
   - surveys of beneficiaries
   - references in policy documents at regional, national and EU level
   - media attention
   - invitations to and presentations at events organized by others
   - use of outputs of the project by third parties

WP leaders and partners will be asked to report against these criteria.

2. At the end of the two-year period of the project produce an overall analysis of the work of the project which will inform the final report. Again this analysis will focus on:

- If project deliverables were delivered on time
- An analysis of project milestones
- The overall management of the consortium throughout the life of the project
- The management of communication within the consortium
- The management of communication between the consortium and the Commission
- The impact of the project deliverables

The project manager will be asked to report against these in early November 2014. Partners will be asked to comment on their perceptions of effectiveness of these aspects of the project in mid November 2014

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